

FOREWORD: REDEMPTIONS

My father had many faces. There was much that made up the man. If you think you “know” John R Cash, think again. There are many layers, so much beneath the surface.

First, I knew him to be fun. Within the first six years of my life, if asked what Dad was to me I would have emphatically responded: “Dad is fun!” This was my simple foundation for my enduring relationship with my father.

This is the man he was. He never lost this.

To those who knew him well—family, friends, coworkers alike—the one essential thing that was blazingly evident was the

light and laughter within my father's heart. Typically, though his common image may be otherwise, he was not heavy and dark, but loving and full of color.

Yet there was so much more . . .

For one thing—he was brilliant. He was a scholar, learned in ancient texts, including those of Flavius Josephus and unquestionably of the Bible. He was an ordained minister and could easily hold his own with any theologian. His books on ancient history, such as Gibbon's *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, were annotated, read, reread, and worn, his very soul deeply ingrained into their threadbare pages. I still have some of these books. When I hold them, when I touch the pages, I can sense my father in some ways even more profoundly than in his music.

My father was an entertainer. This is, of course, one of the most marked and enduring manifestations. There are thousands upon thousands of new Johnny Cash fans every year, inspired by the music, talent, and—I believe hugely—by the mystery of the man.

My dad was a poet. He saw the world through unique glasses, with simplicity, spirituality, and humor. He loved a good story and was quick to find comedy, even in bleak circumstances. This is evident in one of the last songs he wrote within his lifetime, “Like the 309”:

It should be a while before I see Dr. Death
So it would sure be nice if I could get my breath

Well, I'm not the crying nor the whining kind
Till I hear the whistle of the 309
Of the 309, of the 309
Put me in my box on the 309.

Take me to the depot, put me to bed
Blow an electric fan on my gnarly old head
Everybody take a look, see I'm doing fine
Then load my box on the 309
On the 309, on the 309
Put me in my box on the 309.

Dad was asthmatic and had great difficulty breathing during the last months of his life. On top of all this, he suffered with recurring bouts of pneumonia. Still, through the gift of laughter, he found the strength to face these infirmities. This recording is steeped in irony, although made mere days before his passing. His voice is weak, yet the mirth in his soul rings true.

Dad was many things, yes. He was tortured throughout his life by sadness and addiction. His tragic youth was marked by the loss of his best friend and brother Jack, who died as the result of a horrible accident when John R was only twelve. Jack was a deeply spiritual young man, kind and protective of his two-years-younger brother. Perhaps it was this sadness and mourning that partly defined my father's poetry and songs throughout his life. He was like-

wise defined at the end of his life by the loss of my mother, June Carter. When she passed, their love was more beautiful than ever before: unconditional and kind.

Still, it could not be said that any of this—darkness, love, sadness, music, joy, addiction—wholly defined the man. He was all of these things and none of them. Complicated, but what could be said that speaks the essential truth? What prevails? The music, of course . . . but also . . . *the words*.

All that made up my father is to be found in this book, within these “forever words.”

When my parents died, they left behind a monstrous amassment of “stuff.” They just didn’t throw anything away. Each and every thing was a treasure, but none more than my father’s handwritten letters, poems, and documents, ranging through the entirety of his life. There was a huge amount of paper—his studies of the book of Job, his handwritten autobiography *Man in Black*, his letters to my mother, and those to his first wife, Vivian, from the 1950s. Dad was a writer, and he never ceased. His writings ranged through every stage of his life: from the poems of a naive yet undeniably brilliant sixteen-year-old to later comprehensive studies on the life of the Apostle Paul. The more I have looked, the more I have understood of the man.

When I hold these papers, I feel his presence within the handwriting; it brings him back to me. I remember how he held his pen, how his hand shook a bit, but how careful and proud he was of his penmanship—and how determined and courageous he was. Some of these pages are stained with coffee, perhaps the ink smudged.

When I read these pages, I feel the love he carried in those hands. I once again feel the closeness of my father, how he cared so deeply for the creative endeavor; how he cared for his loved ones.

There are some of these I feel he would have wanted to be shared, some whose genius and brilliance simply demanded to be heard. I hope and believe the ones chosen within this book are those he would want read by the world.

Finally, it is not only the strength of his poetic voice that speaks to me, it is his very life enduring and coming anew with these writings. It is in these words my father sings a new song, in ways he has never done before. Now, all these years past, the *words* tell a full tale; with their release, he is with us again, speaking to our hearts, making us laugh, and making us cry.

The music will endure, this is true. But also, the *words*. It is ultimately evident within these words that the sins and sadnesses have failed, that goodness commands and triumphs. To me, this book is a redemption, a cherished healing. *Forever.*

John Carter Cash

35,000 feet above western Arkansas, flying east . . .

INTRODUCTION

I.

The great artist has a finger on the pulse of his time; he also quickens that pulse. In the case of Johnny Cash, his music seems to well up directly from the poverty and deprivation of country life in the Great Depression, through the uncertainty of World War II, the Cold War, Korea, and Vietnam, to the victories of adulation and the vicissitudes of addiction. We might guess, even if we didn't know, that Cash's classic "Five Feet High and Rising" is an account of the flooding with which he was all too familiar from his 1930s childhood in the cotton fields of Arkansas:

How high's the water, mama?
Five feet high and risin'
How high's the water, papa?
Five feet high and risin'

His song "Man in Black" is a deft and dexterous comment on Vietnam, a subject on which so many others were heavy-handed:

And I wear it for the thousands who have died,
Believin' that the Lord was on their side
I wear it for another hundred thousand who have died,
Believin' that we all were on their side

The relationship between the amphitheater and amphetamines, meanwhile, is rather neatly delineated in a piece collected here called "Going, Going, Gone":

Liquid, tablet, capsule, powder
Fumes and smoke and vapor
The payoff is the same in the end
Liquid, tablet, capsule, powder
Fumes and smoke and vapor
Convenient ways to get the poison in

So ingrained in our collective unconscious is the voice of Johnny Cash that we can all but hear the *boom-chicka boom-chicka* of his guitar accompaniment, at once reassuring and disquieting in its very familiarity.

The defining characteristic of an effective lyric—even the greatest of them—is that it doesn't quite hold up to the scrutiny we might bring to bear on a poem, that only something along the lines of that missing *boom-chicka* will allow it to be completely what it most may be. In the case of work that is previously unpublished, or hitherto overlooked, this intrinsic lack is thrown into even greater relief. Is it possible that Cash himself chose not to round out, never mind record, some or all of these pieces? Are we doing him and his memory a disservice in allowing them out of the attic and into the wider world? Writers of the stature of Elizabeth Bishop, T. S. Eliot, and Philip Larkin are among those whose reputations have suffered at least a dent from the indiscriminate publication of their second- or third-rate efforts. And the fact is that even great artists not only nod, like Homer, but also produce nonstarters and no-nos.

Such considerations weighed heavily on the team—John Carter Cash and Steve Berkowitz—most immediately involved in the collection and collation of the copious raw material from which I was able to make this selection. It was with an initial sense of relief, then an increasingly rapturous glee, that I realized there is so much here that will indeed broaden and deepen our perception of Johnny Cash and his legacy.

II.

Before thinking about Johnny Cash's legacy, though, I'd like to appeal to a passage from T. S. Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent," which I continue to find particularly instructive in this matter:

No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead. I mean this as a principle of aesthetic, not merely historical, criticism. The necessity that he shall conform, that he shall cohere, is not one-sided; what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it.

The veracity of Eliot's last profound observation may be seen in a piece like "The Dogs Are in the Woods":

The dogs are in the woods
And the huntin's lookin' good
And the raccoons on the hill
I can hear them trailing still

These dogs are calling out to some of their not-too-distant relatives, the hunting hounds poisoned by Lord Randall's dissed girlfriend, as reported by Lord Randall to his mother in the traditional Scotch-Irish folksong "Lord Randall":

“What became of your bloodhounds, Lord Randall my son?
What became of your bloodhounds, my handsome young man?”
“O they swelled and they died: mother, make my bed soon,
for I'm weary wi' hunting, and fain wald lie down.”

We've already seen the dialogue format of the "Lord Randall" ballad repurposed in "Five Feet High and Rising." The "Muscadine Wine" we find in this collection is an offshoot of the same vine that gave us the blood-red wine in the Scottish standard "The Ballad of Sir Patrick Spens":

The King sits in Dunfermline town,
Drinking the blood-red wine;
“O where shall I get a skeely skipper
To sail this ship or mine?”

Then up and spake an eldern knight,
Sat at the King's right knee:
“Sir Patrick Spens is the best sailor
That ever sailed the sea.”

The King has written a broad letter,
And sealed it with his hand,
And sent it to Sir Patrick Spens,
Was walking on the strand.

It's no accident that the tradition of the Scots ballad, along with its transmogrified versions in North America, is one in which Johnny Cash should be so at ease, given that the first recorded instance of the name Cash—that of Roger Cass—is found in, of all things, the *Registrum de Dunfermelyn*. The entry is dated 1130, during the reign of King David I of Scotland (r. 1124–1153). “The Ballad of Sir Patrick Spens” is set in Dunfermline a mere hundred sixty years later, in 1290.

We may also see the influence of the Scotch-Irish tradition in the use of the tag phrase at the end of each verse (a device we've come to associate with the work of Bob Dylan), in a piece like “Slumgullion”:

Every day's a brand-new mountain
Don't drink long at any fountain
You'll be turned into slumgullion

“Slumgullion” is a word that means several things, including a watery stew, the watery waste left after the rendering of whale

blubber, and the slurry associated with a mine. It is generally believed to be derived from “slum,” an old word for “slime,” and “gullion,” an English dialect term for “mud” or “cesspool.” “Gullion” may actually be a corruption of the Gaelic word *góilín*, “pit” or “pool.” The earliest recorded usage of “slumgullion,” in Mark Twain’s *Roughing It* (1872), refers to a drink:

Then he poured for us a beverage which he called “Slumgullion,” and it is hard to think he was not inspired when he named it. It really pretended to be tea, but there was too much dish-rag, and sand, and old bacon-rind in it to deceive the intelligent traveler.

The Scotch-Irish song tradition has a strong humorous component that may be detected in “Jellico Coal Man,” a song about life in a Tennessee mining town that could easily have been called Slumgullion had it not already been named after the wild angelica (*Angelica sylvestris*) that grows there in abundance:

It will warm your baby in the winter time
It comes direct from the Jellico mine
When the sun comes up that’s the time I start
You will see me comin’ with my two-wheel cart

There's a not too-far-from-the-surface eroticism about this coal-mining man that straddles not only the ballad tradition but also the bawdiness of certain old blues songs. We recognize it in "Hey, Baby, Wake Up," with its assertion that "I need my biscuit buttered, Babe." We have detected it in "Who's Gonna Grease My Skillet?" when he says "Who's gonna squeeze my juice if you should go," with a nod and wink in the direction of Robert Johnson's "Squeeze my lemon."

In addition to conjuring up the naughty nickname attached to, say, Jelly Roll Morton, "Jellico Coal Man" brings to mind the city of Jericho, the walls of which succumbed to the power of music when the Israelite priests sounded their ram's-horn trumpets. (In one of those fascinating coincidences that many of us enjoy, Jellico was the childhood home of Homer Rodeheaver, the famous evangelist and trombonist.) The iconography of the Bible is a constant in Johnny Cash's work, rarely so powerful as in a piece like "Job," with its recalibration of Job as cattle baron:

Job was a wealthy man
He had a lot of kids and a lot of land
He had cattle on a thousand hills
He lived every day to do God's will

On a technical note, there exist a number of versions of the "Job" text in Cash's hand. As with several other pieces included

here, I drew on these multiple manuscript sources to make a plausible “finished” version. An attentive reader may therefore remark on discrepancies and disconnects, variations and vagaries, between the printed texts and the facsimile material with which they’re so artfully interspersed. That reader may also notice the rationalization of stanza breaks and the generally normative tendencies of grammar, punctuation, and spelling. Cash’s occasional misspellings need be perpetuated no more than Yeats’s, and that includes the humorous humdinger “Caddilac.”

There’s another humorous strand running through a number of these lyrics that draws on the cowboy tradition, be it the Lone Ranger mounted on Silver, referred to in “Spirit Rider” (“I will mount my Hi-Yo and I will ride off, ma’am”), or the singing cowboy Roy Rogers in “Hey, Baby, Wake Up”:

Hey, Baby, wake up
Did you hear the latest news
The man said Roy and Dale split up
And Dale got Trigger, too
Yeah, I hear your sweet feet on the floor
I knew that’d get through to you

That humor extends to the litany of exhortations in “Don’t Make a Movie About Me” that reflect Cash’s own ambivalence about celebrity and the associated tabloid slobbering:

Don't let 'em drag old Hickory Lake
For my telephones and bottles and roller skates . . .
Out a hundred yards from my lakeside house
Weighted down with a rock is a skirt and blouse
A dozen pair of boots that made a dozen corns
Trombones, trumpets, harmonicas and horns
And the tapes that I threw from the lakeside door
Silverstein, and Kristofferson from years before

This was the selfsame Shel Silverstein who won the Grammy Award for Best Country Song of 1969 for “A Boy Named Sue.” He was friendly with David Allan Coe, also mentioned in “Don’t Make a Movie About Me,” who had the distinction of embarking on his music career in Nashville while living in a hearse parked outside Ryman Auditorium, a macabre touch that would surely have appealed to Cash. The song continues:

If they're hot on a book called *Man in Black*
Tell 'em I've got the rights and won't give back
If you don't know my tune you can't get it right
I don't talk about me in *Man in White*

As it turns out, *Man in White* is the title of Cash's historical novel about the life of Saint Paul before and after his conversion. We're

reminded, of course, that Johnny Cash as the “Man in Black” is less gunslinger than psalm-singing preacher, the unapologetic nature of his Christian faith shining through in “He Bore It All for Me,” a piece that takes as its text Matthew 11:28, “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” A faith in the sense that there is a world beyond this one must at least partly inform the sentiments of “Forever”:

But the trees that I planted
Still are young
The songs I sang
Will still be sung

III.

In addition to the sense that it functions within time, the great work of art brings with it a profound sense of timelessness. There’s a sense of immortality and inevitability that suggests (1) that it has always existed and (2) that it was always meant to exist in this form and this form only. Johnny Cash’s quiet insistence that his songs “will still be sung” might easily be read as self-regarding but is more accurately perceived as a manifestation of the humility that is an absolute prerequisite in art-making: it has less to do with his name and fame being bruited about in Dubai or Decatur or Dunfermline itself than with his achieving a kind of beautiful anonymity. It’s a claim to deathlessness that may be made only by someone who has taken into

account that, like “The Ballad of Sir Patrick Spens,” Johnny Cash’s brilliant “California Poem” was written by everyone and no one:

The lights are on past midnite
The curtains closed all day
There’s trouble on the mountain
The valley people say

Paul Muldoon